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Working with Koch*

Warren Chappell

Fifty years ago, in the autumn of 1930, I began to make plans to learn to cut type punches. That fall my first book, Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, was published by Columbia University Press. I did the typography, binding, and jacket, and engraved thirteen illustrations by my friend Charles Locke, instructor of lithography at the Art Students' League. The printing was the work of George Grady, who had been pressing me to learn punch cutting for at least three years. I had already earned a bachelor's degree from a university and had studied at the Art Students' League, where I was a member of the Board of Control. Also, I had been working as promotional art director for *Liberty Magazine* for two and a half years.

At the time my thoughts about instruction in punch cutting centered largely on Paris. The firm of Debergny and Peignort had special prominence in typographic circles due to an association with the influential *Arts et Metiers Graphiques*. However, work with an independent punch cutter, such as Charles Malin, seemed most attractive. At that time, Continental Typefounders was the major importer of European type. The firm's owner and president was Melbert Cary, whose name is now connected with the Rochester Institute of Technology. As Melbert had contact with all the major foundries, he was a logical source of information about punch cutting. He was not enthusiastic about France. In fact, he said, the French would not tell me anything, even if they knew, and he asked me what I had heard about the *Offenbacher Werkstatt*. It so happened that Philip Hofer had mounted an exhibition at the New York Public Library that was dedicated to the Klingspor Foundry and the *Offenbacher Werkstatt*. I wrote to Rudolph Koch sometime in December and, in January of 1931, received an invitation to go and work with him.

My wife, Lydia, and I set out for Germany in April and arrived on the 27th. At Bremerhaven we were handed a letter of welcome. A speaking engagement would take Koch from Offenbach for a few

days, but we would be met and shown to our living quarters by Fritz Kredel and Berthold Wolpe. It was Fritz who greeted Lydia and me when we got our first glimpse of the *Werkstatt*, and it was Berthold who introduced us to the family we were to rent from during our stay in Offenbach.

The town, situated across the Main River from Frankfurt, is an industrial center and not very beautiful—even less so now, than when we first saw it, nearly half a century ago. There were areas along the river that could be enchanting, but for the most part it suffered from the proximity of Frankfurt. Offenbach was especially noted for its leather manufacturing and was called *die Lederstadt* or Leather City. The presence there of a great type foundry was fortuitous. The Klingspor brothers, Karl and Wilhelm, acquired the Rudhardt'schen Giesserei in 1891 and rechristened it Gebr. Klingspor. It was to this foundry that Rudolph Koch had come as artist-designer at the age of thirty.

Koch was born in Nuremburg in 1876, son of a sculptor whose work was divided between acting as chief of guards at the Bavarian Arts and Crafts Museum and performing some of his own art and craft to support a wife, son and two daughters. The elder Koch died when Rudolph was only ten years old. By the age of fifteen, Rudolph was in Hanau, apprenticed as a chaser—an engraver of decorative patterns in metal. He was not happy and set out to find a place for himself that would be more fulfilling. His search took him as far afield as the greeting-card house of Raphael Tuck in London. He could not make the grade there, and returned to Germany.

Despite disappointment, he persevered with his efforts as a designer and letterer. For about four years he worked in Leipzig. Then he answered an advertisement for a designer at the Offenbach foundry. His lifelong association with Karl Klingspor began in 1906. In 1908 the foundry started cutting his first type face, and the art school in Offenbach asked him to teach a special class in lettering and calligraphy. The type was a success. A way of life had begun that seemed tailored to Koch's needs as an artist. While in Leipzig he had married Rosa Koch, daughter of an intaglio printer, to whom he was not related. Four children were born, a son and three daughters.

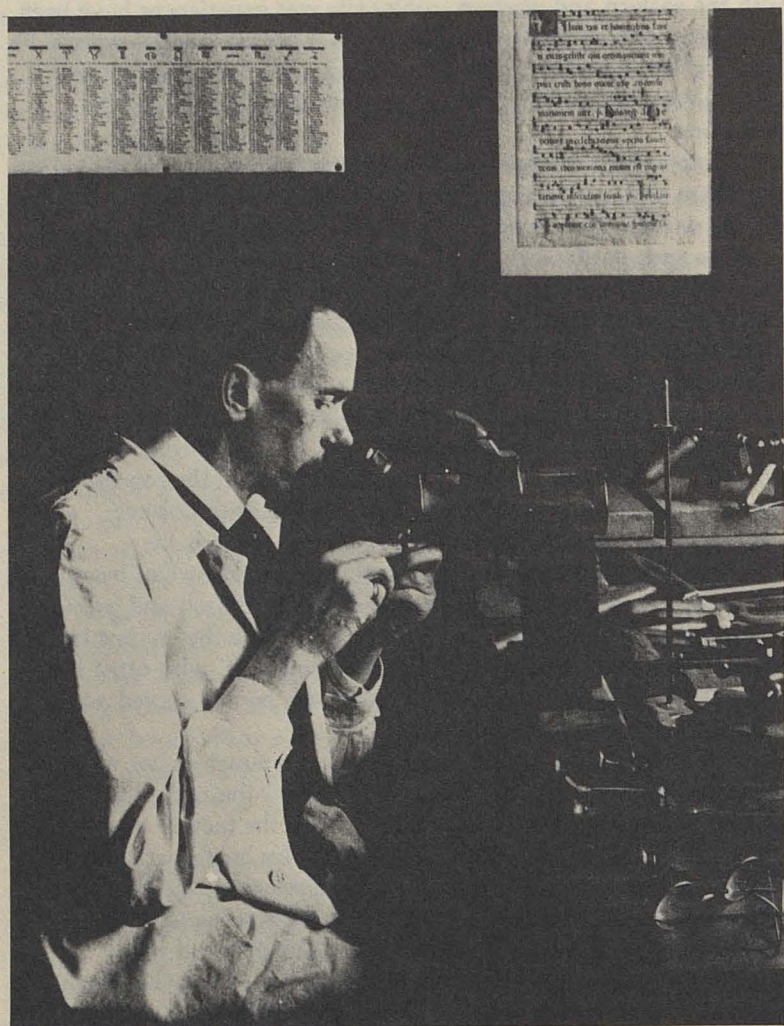
However, that quiet and productive existence was rudely interrupted by the war of 1914-1918. Koch was called up for the army despite many physical handicaps, and saw arduous service on

both the eastern and western fronts. His war experiences have been published by Insel Verlag. In 1918, after a period in the hospital, he was discharged and returned to his family, his foundry and his school. War had not lessened his art, but it had simplified his ambitions.

Rudolph Koch emerged from his Armageddon with an increasing asceticism and spirituality. The Bible became the chief source of his written works. He yearned for a closer relationship with his students and, particularly, with a few carefully chosen ones who could share rather than simply absorb his enthusiasm. That wish took shape in 1920 as the *Offenbacher Schreibwerkstatt*. In 1922 Victor Hammer visited *Offenbacher* in connection with the cutting of his uncial by the Klingspor Foundry. The two men met and became friends. Hammer introduced to Koch the idea of a broadened use of letterforms as tapestries, both embroidered and woven. The *Schreibwerkstatt* had been housed on the top floor of the art school in a long corridor-shaped room with dormer windows. In time an adjoining room was readied for the *Webwerkstatt*. The concept of collective productions had begun. Soon, work began on objects designed for the church and executed in brass and silver. These were fashioned outside the studios by two silversmiths, Kurt Jobst and Walter Schoenwandt, who often left some of the final chasing to Koch. After all, he had served an apprenticeship in that craft.

After World War I Gustave Eichenauer, a punch-cutter who had begun his apprenticeship at the foundry about the time Koch arrived to be a designer, was detached from the factory and allowed to work in the engraving shop run by his father. It was situated almost opposite the *Technische Lehranstalt*, the school where Koch taught and where the *Werkstatt* was housed. Eichenauer proceeded with his cutting of punches and with consultations outside the confines of Klingspor. However, Koch retained a small studio at the foundry and the familiar photograph of him at work on a punch was made in that room. It was there that Koch cut Neuland, Jessen and Marathon.

Now, I am not at all sure what I expected Rudolph Koch's physical appearance to be. Time engraves Koch's image on the memory of those who have been close to him long enough to come in contact with the entire man, and all preconceptions fade. One was first conscious of his sober dress. There was something of the Pennsylvania Amish about him, with his black suit and black flat-

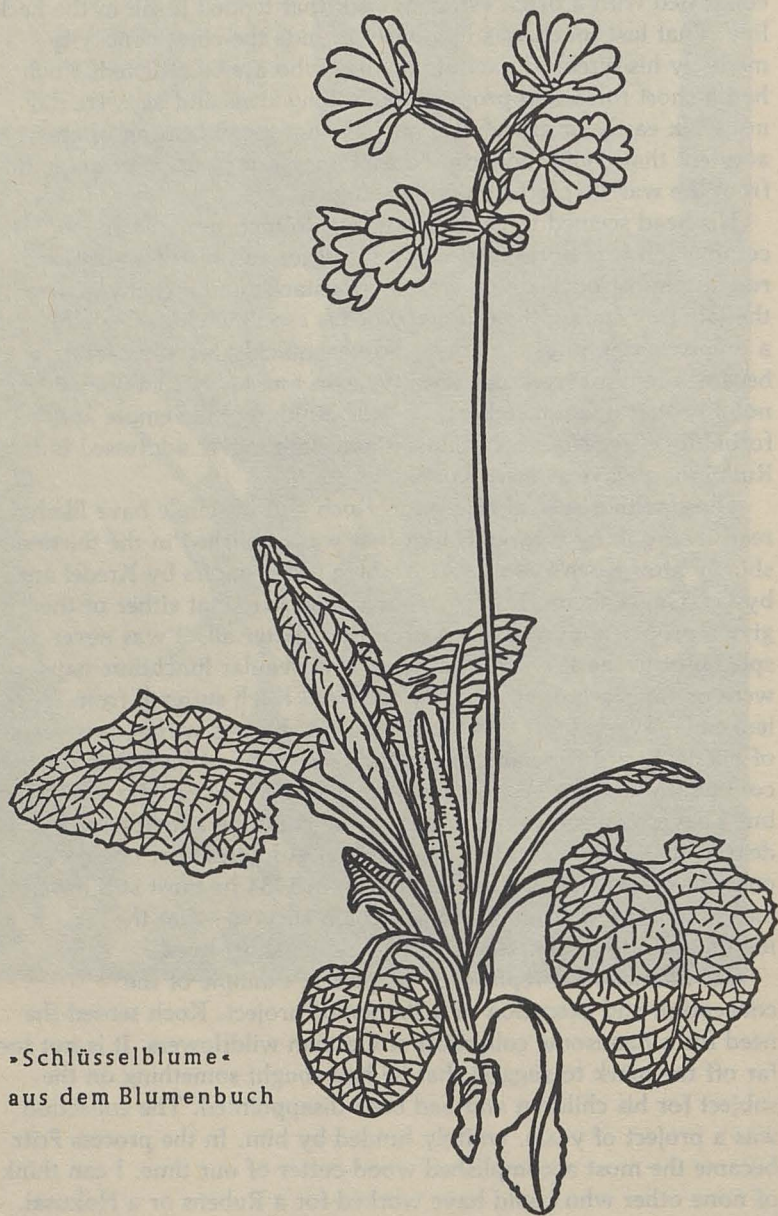


crowned and wide-brimmed hat. He wore a stiff Buster Brown-like collar tied with a black Windsor knot that tended to fill in the neck line. That last touch was obviously to hide the chest concavity made by his hunched back. Like most who are so afflicted, Koch had a short torso and proportionally long arms and legs. He did not walk easily or gracefully, but I do not recall hearing of an accident that could have caused an injury—or perhaps of a wound from the war that left him with a limp.

His head seemed large, but was not, in fact, unnaturally so. His complexion was florid, especially his nose; and his skin appeared rough, almost pocked. He wore a moustache and a wispy goatee, the latter amending the fall-away of his receding chin. Certainly not a prepossessing physiognomy, and yet, quickly his inner light became manifest from out sensitive eyes and his head assumed the nobility that one remembers. He was anything but remote and forbidding, yet Kredel, his closest associate, never addressed him as Rudolph, always as Herr Koch.

Those with a special interest in Koch and his circle have likely read the book by George Haupt that was published in the thirties, shortly after Koch's death. Also, there are memoirs by Kredel and by Dr. Guggenheim. I do not recall, however, that either of them give a proper notion of Koch's frailness. After all, it was never spoken of in the *Werkstatt*, although his regular lunchtime naps were obviously more than mere regimen. Koch suffered from leukemia. When I left Offenbach in 1932, he was within two years of his death at fifty-eight. He would talk to me of his hopes for the continuation of the *Werkstatt* under the direction of Fritz Kredel, but I never realized that at that time he could be anticipating his death. In 1932 he ridiculed the idea that Adolph Hitler could ever come to power in Germany, and even in 1934 he must still have had some faith that his *Werkstatt* could survive—that the nightmare of National Socialism would be short-lived.

Das Blumenbuch represents the perfect example of the conception and execution of a *Werkstatt* project. Koch sensed the need for a handsome collection of German wildflowers. It is not too far off the mark to suggest that he had sought something on the subject for his children and had been disappointed. The collection was a project of years, entirely funded by him. In the process Fritz became the most accomplished wood-cutter of our time. I can think of none other who could have worked for a Rubens or a Hokusai. Koch made the drawings from nature with a flat pen—the same



»Schlüsselblume«
aus dem Blumenbuch

sort of pen he might have used if his Jessenschrift had ever been put on paper. The translation of the drawn to the cut line was part of his approach to designing for the press. Let us believe that he inherited a little of that from his sculptor father—it is certainly a reasonable hypothesis. And one might add that his apprenticeship at gold- and silversmithing heightened that instinct. Certainly, it led him to getting files and gravers and cutting Neuland, Jessen and Marathon. He told me that an Arabic cipher that looked as though the counter had been struck with a nail had helped create his urge to cut an alphabet on his own. At the heart of the vision is that revealed awareness of type as three dimensional form and the urge to arrive at a shape by a process of subtraction and simplification.

Insel Verlag was not involved as publisher for *Das Blumenbuch* until the plan was entirely set. Kleukens of Mainz was printer and Wollner of Leipzig produced the stencils and did the coloring. The stencils were made of metal as thin as that used for shims. Proofs from the blocks were offset onto the metal which had been prepared with a resist. Then the stencils were drawn and etched rather than cut with a knife.

A few sets of proofs were made from the blocks on Japanese paper by rubbing. They were hand colored, matted and gathered into a box made of wood and covered with parchment. The parchment was decorated by Willi Harwerth, the distinguished house artist at Gebr. Klingspor. The date of *Das Blumenbuch* was 1930, so it was off the press only shortly before our arrival in Offenbach.

The material for Kredel's wood-cutting was plank pear wood. This he could get from Klingspor where it was used for wood type. His knife handle had been made by Walter Shoenwandt, Koch's silversmith. A Henckel blade was held in a simple chuck. Kredel sharpened it on a large treadle-operated grindstone. In the beginning, he had used a pen knife made by Henckel for sharpening quills. A beam in the storage room off the *Werkstatt* was studded porcupine-like with used-up knives. Instead of a leather pad for rotating his work, he used a box. His loop was ancient and hand-held, and he managed to cover his right eye with his fist and turn the block with his little finger. He used his knife in his left hand. Kredel learned to cut wood in a way that made him capable of approaching his own designs without technique taking hold and overwhelming his basic method. He had method—just as Koch did, and I feel sure that both would want me to say that Kredel was one

of Koch's creations—just as much as any of the types that Koch cut by hand.

The big project of the early thirties was the map of Germany. Kredel drew the map; Koch provided the calligraphy and heraldic devices. The compass card was by Berthold Wolpe who has lived in London since his departure from Germany and during most of those years has taught in Edward Johnston's old post at the Royal College of Art. Unfortunately, the boundary lines of the *Werkstatt* map did not satisfy the Nazis, so it had a short life on the market. It was drawn in sections, and line cuts were made at the Klingspor Foundry, where there was an excellent photoengraving department. However, Koch was never completely satisfied with an etched line and kept Richard Bender in the studio to sharpen contours on the plate with a graver. If not that method, he would have Bender sharpen the copy.

Koch had a feeling for a cut line that went beyond craftsmanship. Of all the calligraphers I have known, he was most obviously, first and foremost, an artist. He would have subscribed to Michaelangelo's statement: "When I draw, I carve, and when I carve, I draw." I have tried to describe this approach in type as *sculptural*, and I do believe that it stands at the very heart of the division between hot and cold composition. Those who are familiar with Eric Gill will surely be aware of his contempt for pictures of type. Of course, Gill was a sculptor and engraver, so it is natural that he would be sensitive to the character of a cut punch and a cast letter.

I think that Koch also had a keen appreciation of the difference between fashion and style—just as he could differentiate between technique and method. I do not think he ever sought to be an innovator, and yet his mark is on everything he touched. We are celebrating Koch at the Graphic Arts Seminar in Lexington, because that is the case.

I do not know that anyone has managed to capture the essence of Koch's arrangement with life. God knows Nature had played major jokes on him: a poor physical endowment and the loss of his father at an early age. It would seem, however, that neither of these managed to do more than get him off to what appeared to be a false start or two. There was no sign that he regarded his fate as harsh, in any way. He was a truly modest man, and it is possible that modesty kept him from feeling that he *had* in some ways been denied the full use of his talents. To repeat, he was, indeed, an

artist, and even in his perseverance towards craftsmanship, he constantly showed the traits of genius rather than technical accomplishment. He was committed to God and to his work, but neither dampened his native humor. If one keeps these facts in mind, he should come close to understanding the man.

Most of the good calligraphers of this century have expressed some degree of debt to Edward Johnston and to his classic book, *Writing and Illuminating and Lettering*. Anna Simons was one of his pupils, and since E. R. Weiss studied with her, his connection was direct. Koch had *Writing and Illuminating* in the *Werkstatt* in two editions: German and English. It was there that I got to know it. Johnston owed something to William Morris, but the latter never tried to get to the bones of the alphabet. He was content with the skin. Johnston's book is exemplary, and certainly he was most influential in his teaching at the Royal College of Art. I have but one reservation about that book, and that is its influence on the present character of chancery script as it is most generally practiced. The use of the writing manuals of Arrighi, Tagliente and Palatino has obscured the flow of the forms. It would seem that there was no way to get the fluid nature, the intrinsic beat onto a block and cut it. In that sense, there could be more success with italic types, since each letter was considered individually.

Johnston's teaching by copybook contrasts with Koch's way of teaching by structure and color. I could add beat, but it seems to me that the pulse of the forms was learned by the apprentice through his understanding of their nature, that is, those that were lapidary and geometric and those that were born of the pen. Koch put his beginners to work with a speedball-like round nib on cross section paper. He had them write capitals of even weight. This was to learn the geometry of the armatures. The lines were kept close together in order to stress the nature of color in mass and to sense the need for avoiding stems falling one line below the other and thus creating lines of vertical passage through the text.

Next, block letters were made with a flat nib, turned to make all strokes full width. The resulting alphabet bore a resemblance to Koch's Neuland type. The third stage would be to hold the flat pen at an angle and produce heavy and light strokes. He thought of Roman as an upper case alphabet and fraktur as a lower case one. Therefore, he could communicate to those who worked with him certain simple benchmarks for testing the dividing lines between freshness and fad. To repeat, it was a structural approach—plus

finger exercise, of course.

In my case, he suggested that I write forms large and then abstract them on overlays. It was akin to cutting. He also encouraged me to do some inscriptional stone-cutting. This took the form of some small design for a church in Bavaria where his son-in-law was minister.

Fortunately for me, Paul Koch returned from Florence during the latter part of our stay. He had been working with Victor Hammer on a version of Victor's uncial and doing some printing, as well. We joined in cutting a versal that his father had written with a pointed brush. It was the first time Paul had worked on a design by Koch senior. Just before his father's death Paul cut the first size of Claudius—a most remarkable example of translating calligraphy into type punches. In 1932 Ernst Schneidler had approached Paul with a proposal that he cut a design that later was produced by Bauer and named Legend—*Legende* in German. Without doubt the result would have been better if Paul had cut it.

During the early thirties there were several outstanding punch cutters in Europe, and I think of Hoell at Bauer, Rosenberger at Stempel and Radisch at Enschede, especially. However, it was Gustav Eichenauer whom I knew and with whom I was able to work. I have referred to his long and close association with Koch which gave him a unique relationship with an artist partner. It was stimulating, then, to be able to compare and learn from the three styles of cutting that were practiced by Koch, his son Paul and Eichenauer. Koch's was all art; Paul's a highly sensitized craft; and Eichenauer's all craft and experience. I left Offenbach convinced of the fundamental virtues of punches in the creation of alphabets for printing. Soon after my return to New York I had an opportunity to suggest to Linotype that they hire a German punch cutter to produce the pilot sizes of the designs that W. A. Dwiggins was doing for them. I got nowhere, but I still believe that Electra and Caledonia would have come closer in spirit to the artist's hopes if they had been handled in that way. Dwiggins was one of a limited number of designers who had the benefit of a God-given talent for design. Chesterton said of Dickens: if someone stole one of his characters, he simply invented another. I would like to say the same about WAD on the eve of the celebration of his hundredth birthday at the Boston Public Library Wednesday the eighth of October.

In preparing these remarks I have been constantly aware of the

difficulty of introducing to you the man I knew and of whom I have so many recollections. Perhaps I can best leave you with an intimate impression of him if I let him speak for himself. I quote from a letter dated 19 August 1932 in which he attempted to sum up our year together. I use a translation made in the mid-fifties by Eleanor Steiner-Prag, Hugo's widow.

Dear Friend and fellow-worker Chappell, calligrapher, punchcutter, engraver in metal and wood, contemporary on the other continent!

It is a phenomenon and a miracle indeed, that your good angel brought you and Lydia to Offenbach, that you took it upon yourselves to deal with the various difficulties of the life, the country and the place—and for the duration of an entire year, your sole purpose was to work with us in the Workshop, high up under the roof. Only now, after the time is over, do I recognize the great courage it must have taken you—much more than your countrymen and men in general have. Yes, if all of us were world famous men it would not have been such an accomplishment, but since we mean something to only a small circle, this venture has really been very great, and each time I think of it I am touched by the strong, firm and unshakable confidence which you have thereby expressed and proven to me and my friends.

I know that in America they will not immediately understand what made you go to Germany and what you took back from here to your country. But they will understand soon, and you will also find the opportunity to put our way of working to use. Yes, I believe that this stay in Germany will grow, in time, more and more in importance for you and for all of us.

This is why I wanted to write you, and, in spirit, shake your hand.

May God keep you.

Faithfully yours,

Rudolph Koch

And last, as a footnote on that statement about the importance in time "for you and for all of us,"—even as Koch wrote, my cousin, Oscar Ogg, had graduated in architecture and was on his

way to New York to join me and share what I had learned in Offenbach about calligraphy and the book arts. Six years plus a month later, Fritz Kredel and family arrived in America where he would spend the greater portion of his productive life. More than merely learning to cut punches had come of that time, now long ago, high up under the roof with Rudolph Koch and his friends.

*"Working with Koch" was Mr. Chappell's address to the Fourth Seminar in Graphic Design at the King Library Press and was delivered on the evening of 3 October 1980 in the Gallery, Margaret I. King Library, the University of Kentucky. The theme of the seminar was the work of Rudolph Koch.